

# **A Working White Paper**

---

## **Engaging Residents in Low-Income Housing Communities to Volunteer and Earn an Economic Opportunity**

**An Innovative Approach to a Supportive Service Program for  
Residents In Low-Income Multifamily Rental Housing**

**December 1, 2013**



Working papers are in draft form. This working paper is distributed for purposes of comment and discussion only. It may not be reproduced without permission of the copyright holder. Copies of working papers are available from the author.

## Acknowledgements and Special Thanks:

We want to thank the following organizations: United Way of Central Indiana and the Harvard Business School Alumni Club of Indiana for their encouragement in this project. We thank both Janice Monks, CEO, and Judith Chavis, COO, of the American Association of Service Coordinators for their technical assistance in support of this Whitepaper.

We would also like to recognize the following individuals for helping with edits and providing invaluable feedback to the drafting of the White Paper: Melissa Norcross, Rashad Gold, Thomas Dougherty, Ryan Rusnak and Benjamin Downing.

We also like to thank individuals who have contributed to our surveys, interviews and providing feedback and testimonials. At their request, we have kept the names anonymous.

## About Bella Communities:

Bella Communities is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization working to provide affordable low-income housing and to engage residents to volunteer, create change from within and gain an economic opportunity. Bella Communities also provides consulting, training and services to other organizations to launch similar resident volunteer engagement programs. Bella Communities can be contacted at:

Mr. Khoi Pham  
Executive Director  
213-268-0359  
[kpham@bellacommunities.org](mailto:kpham@bellacommunities.org)

## I. Overview

Estimates show greater than 10 million households translating to more than 40 million people living in low-income housing communities.<sup>1</sup> Quite often, these communities have limited economic resources, low civic engagement and are located in neighborhoods without strong community ties. Residents in low-income housing are often the working-poor, earning and living dollar to dollar, eligible for subsidized housing but still responsible for a renter's portion, barely meeting basic expenses for transportation, groceries, utilities, and with little reserves and virtually no savings. In a state of financial fragility, residents live in constant anxiety, not knowing if rent can be met, facing evictions, or resorting to rent skipping, worrying about housing and school stability for their kids, neglecting general health and wellness, and seldom participating in community activities and feeling engaged. The missed opportunity to engage in the community further reduces the residents bond to the community, fails to strengthen social networks and accrue social equity, and fails to foster skills-building and self-worth.

Bella Communities designed and tested an innovative supportive service program to tackle simultaneously both financial empowerment and civic engagement mobilization. The Resident Volunteer United Program (ReV-UP) engages residents living in low-income communities to volunteer with other non-profit organizations as a pathway into civic engagement and economic opportunity. The program provides rent incentives for volunteerism because it is a bridge to help residents with an EARNED economic opportunity. We believe through ReV-UP, residents are stitching together a financial backstop, building life and vocational skills, being more community minded and engaging actively. Studies have shown that volunteers have 27 percent higher odds of finding a job after being out of work than non-volunteers.<sup>2</sup>

Through a systematic, integrated program, Bella Communities works with affordable property owners to implement a volunteer engagement and management program. Bella Communities collaborates with governmental agencies, nonprofits and private enterprises and harnesses the collective energy of community leaders, neighbors and professionals to preserve affordable housing and deliver self-empowering programs to connect residents to economic

---

<sup>1</sup> *Based on 2011 data by the Working Poor Families Project Policy Brief, Winter, 2012-2013, by Brandon Roberts, Deborah Povich and Mark Mather..*

<sup>2</sup> *Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment: Does Volunteering Increase Odds of Finding a Job for the Out of Work? Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and evaluation: Washington, DC, 2013.*

and community development. The architecture framework of our approach ensures optimal quality, efficiency, and effectiveness in our services. We believe the ReV-UP program adds value by being a “strong link within the chain” of asset-based community development.

The ReV-UP program has yielded positive results over the initial 18-month pilot period in Indiana. Residents have earned and generated \$17,000 of additional rent subsidies and deployed 2,000 new volunteer hours into non-profits serving the broader community. Residents feel positive about the volunteering and have consistently scored high on the “promoter” scale of the program. Furthermore, residents have further supported the program by volunteering beyond the required minimum hours to receive the fixed rent incentives.

The program also reflected positive results for the property investors and owners. When residents have financial resiliency, property owners are able to keep rent losses down and avoid unnecessary expenses because residents are not skipping rents, or being evicted for non-payment. Furthermore, when sponsored by the property owners, The ReV-UP program provides residents with solutions and serves as a social contract between the residents and the property owners; thereby building trust, respect and care. Property investors/owners are not only preserving the capital asset, but also are building an intangible asset and social capital.

We have seen initial success in this pilot program and are confident that this program is scalable. At the very least, the alternative for not trying and changing the paradigm is much more costly and risky. We have developed and codified an implementation and training methodology with a set of practices and processes, plug-and-play tool kits and lessons learned, and a data collection tool that could quickly be deployed to communities. The aggregated data from various communities can be shared and leveraged to promote benchmarking and best practices. We can consult other communities to implement by mitigating adoption risks, compressing time to implement and removing complexities and minimizing cost.

## **II. What is the Program Description?**

The goal of the ReV-UP program is to empower residents to pursue solutions for themselves. Residents should do as much as they are capable of doing themselves, have self-determination, be self-propelling and achieve self-actualization. The ReV-UP program pivots from a needs-based solution to a resident-based participatory approach, at the heart of asset-based community development. We want to create a social contract and covenant with our

residents; they have a *right* to decent, safe affordable housing, but with the right, there must be personal *responsibility*.

We introduced a resident volunteer engagement program that is innovative and transformative, moved from Common Practice to a solid Envisioned State:

<u>From Common Practice:</u>		<u>To Envisioned State:</u>
Ad hoc haphazard approach	➡	Systemic process, program-based with structure including quality control
Being Charitable and fun	➡	Creating a strong Foundation for building opportunities
Casual, Fragmented	➡	Formal procedures, deliberate, move with intention
Isolated one-off incident	➡	Integrated and united with community engagement and outreach
Pivoting from position of beneficiaries and recipients of services	➡	Contributors and Providers as well

Our theory of change and conclusion is that when we provide affordable housing enhanced with an innovative supportive service program to tackle simultaneously both financial empowerment and civic engagement mobilization, this leads to less financial fragility, promoting stability, providing better wellness and engagement to promote self and community building. Collectively, the capital asset value of the brick and mortar asset is preserved, and social capital value is harnessed through optimism, hope, wellbeing and civic engagement.

### III. What Have the Results Shown for Property Investors/Owners?

Rent loss is one of the key variables that affect operations of a property. Rent loss occurs when there is vacancy or turnover of a unit. Of the reasons for unit turnover, we see close to 50% of the cause attributing to residents vacating and skipping on rent or being evicted. Turnover is costly to property owners because it reduces the stream of rent income, represents down-units, incurs unnecessary eviction costs and turn-costs (i.e., extra marketing costs, getting unit ready for re-

renting, etc.). More acutely, when turnover is associated with skips and evictions, there is an exposure to uncollectible bad debts. We see bad debts as high as 5%+ as percentage of annual Operating Costs. Thus, there is an opportunity that the ReV-UP program through resident financial empowerment deters rent skipping and prevents evictions for non-payments, thereby helping property owners to manage operations and meet projected financial goals.

#### 12-Month Period At A Glance:

Skipped & Evictions Rate	46.7%
Bad Debts/Uncollectible	\$153,066
% of Revenues	2.39%
% of Operating Expenses	5.36%

Customarily, property investors and owners have minimized spending money on supportive service programs or have resisted on spending completely. Some programs are viewed as “expenditures” not yielding direct impact in supporting residents’ economic resiliency thereby missing the dividends from creating financial stability. The ReV-UP program has helped property owners to more optimally direct “investment spending” to supportive service programs that have multiple tangible benefits.

When residents don’t have a social contract with the property investors, and lack engagement and face financial fragility, this breeds apathy and the unwillingness to take pride in their homes. Or residents simply do not see this as a priority since they are more concerned with basic needs of existence and making ends meet. Within this state, deferred maintenance accelerates quicker, depreciation and deterioration escalate and the financial impact discourages property investors/owners from rehabilitating and developing more affordable housing units.

#### **IV. An Innovative Program: Whom does it serve? What needs and challenges does it address?**

##### Conventional Practice

It is rooted in convention to support economically vulnerable individuals by providing affordable and decent housing, anchored by supporting residents through case management and social-work services. Through relationships with external service providers, residents are connected and referred to various wrap-around services. It is also convention that these services (quite often provided by outside volunteers and non-profits) are descended upon the community and paternalistically applied. Albeit not ideal, through these provisions, the residents receive valuable resources and assistance.

## The Gap and Missing Link (what needs and challenges do we solve)

Our low-income families often live near or below poverty and face economic challenges due to unemployment, underemployment or employability. Much community economic resources are deployed to assist these residents under conventional practice. Typically, we see external community volunteer groups, corporate CSR volunteer initiatives descending on the needy to provide assistance. Although all these efforts crucially help and are deeply needed, they unintentionally create dependencies, further isolate the residents and relegate them to a defeatist pariah status of being “takers and recipients”. This one-direction incongruous non-symbiotic relationship does not infuse self-esteem, self-sufficiency and self-determination in the residents. Furthermore, these corporate and community support intentions do not necessarily address the economic needs for those struggling with rent payments (i.e. renter’s portion), utility bills, or other unplanned financial outlays.

We address the missing link in 2-folds: First, we change the one-direction incongruity to encourage a bilateral/joint approach. We want the low-income residents to have a sense of purpose and pride, we champion them to be “volunteers” themselves, be a provider and give to others. We encourage them to be the community volunteer groups and volunteer alongside corporate-sponsored groups to help others. This slight shift of being just the “beneficiary” to a “recipient + provider” starts to create a new mindset injecting self-realization and self-worth. Second, we create conditions and a platform with low barriers for low-income families to “earn through volunteering” as a self-help financial tool. Thereby, we create an environment to foster behavioral dignity and an “earned” economic opportunity.

## Building A Case for Our Program: ReV-UP™ and ResidentCorps™

We invert the paradigm from conventional practice. Derived from our assessments our premise is that low-income residents are not merely beneficiaries/recipients of public goods, but they are capable of creating a public good through resident volunteering, reinvesting in the community and helping themselves financially. By providing a financial incentive and a systematic process, ReV-UP can help to rally residents, teach the benefits of volunteerism, connect volunteer opportunities, and allow them to earn money in exchange for volunteering. Simultaneously, the community and local non-profits will further benefit with this new crop of resident volunteers who are often the same front-line clients, thereby, creating a virtuous circle of engagement and giving. Furthermore, property owners can better channel supportive service funds to increase their return on investment and build better satisfied renters.

ResidentCorps is designed as the “fuel” that propels the program forward. We want to use a peer-to-peer approach by inviting resident volunteers to make

commitment and be a member of ResidentCorps. Three arching guiding principles we ask Resident Corps to embrace are:

- See things not only as they are, but as they could be. That is, we may have to learn to break the paradigm, just because things are the way they are, doesn't mean that they can't be different, better.
- Believe you are capable of making a positive change. We have to believe that we each have something to contribute regardless of our lot, condition, position or station in life.
- Take action, do good, and pass it forward. Action is key in everything we do. We have to make good actions and unleash it out there in the universe.



## V. How Does the Program Work?

To participate in the ReV-UP program, eligible residents on the lease must attend an orientation workshop, complete the registration packet and create a user login ID with at least one volunteer opportunity-matching website (i.e., United Way Volunteer Action Center, Volunteermatch.org, etc.).

### Program Requirements

- At least 4-Hours of Volunteering Minimum Each Month
- Maximum \$25 monthly rent credits (initially \$50 was offered)
- Attendance at a workshop training required



Residents then either attend a community organized volunteer event (i.e., usually a quarterly Spark Event hosted by the property) or self-enroll in volunteer opportunities individually with a qualified IRS determined 501(c)(3) non-profit. Residents volunteer at least 4 hours per month, obtain verification from the hosting non-profit agency and submit the verification to the leasing office. Rent credits or rent incentives are processed and issued to the resident volunteers as part of the property vendor payment process.

In the initial pilot phase of the ReV-UP program, the rent incentives were funded from operating cash flow from the property operations. It was budgeted as part of the total annual supportive services spending pool. In cases where there was not a dedicated budget for supportive services, funding was appropriated from savings as a result of expense avoidance. It should be noted that there were no external sources of funding or grants available for the rent incentives during the initial pilot phase.

To encourage repeat volunteering, residents are invited to join a no-fee ResidentCorps membership after completing at least one 4-hour volunteering activity each quarter. ResidentCorps volunteers receive additional recognition and are entitled to celebrations reserved for ResidentCorps members.

In 2014, we will launch a complementary financial literacy-training program to educate residents on banking products, budgeting, and short-term savings. It is anticipated that the new training will build on resident participation in the resident volunteer program as an economic opportunity and provide more tools to build financial stability. It is further hoped that we can provide a matching program to encourage residents to further save the rent incentives received.

We developed the ReV-UP program underpinned with financial incentives to motivate and to dislodge apathy and begin to influence attitudinal change and foster behavioral shift in actions.

### Building Structure

We designed systematic processes and workflows to integrate with existing property management functions. We developed tool kits of tracking, accounting, measuring, managing and reporting results and impact so that the ReV-UP program can be delivered broadly, effectively, efficiently, and consistently.

### Launching the Initiative

As the driving force for action and an effective catalyst for change, we launched Spark Events, large-scale volunteering episodic events that we convened multiple stakeholders to collectively perform a community volunteer project. We set the tone, created a hands-on example, demonstrated financial rewards and planted the seeds for the residents to perpetuate future individual

volunteering opportunities beyond the Spark Events.

### Fostering and Sustaining

We fostered and sustained the ReV-UP program by forming small clusters of resident volunteer groups tied together by a common ResidentCorps, a no-fee club that residents join and commit to a prerequisite number of volunteer hours in a year. The purpose of the ResidentCorps is to award recognition, appreciation, encourage lessons learned and sharing, build commitment and a sustainable model, train the trainers, peer-to-peer recruiting of other resident volunteers and retain existing volunteers.

## **VI. How Can Service Coordinators Use This As A Tool?**

Service Coordinators are practitioners and professionals on the front line of supportive services provisions. They have an opportunity to steer the conversation, channel their work and make direct impact to the residents and communities they represent.

“It’s not where you live, it’s how you live” – Interview Participant

Service Coordinators can help frame the topic around resident volunteerism under a broader concept of civic engagement and a pathway into economic opportunity and community building. Volunteerism and civic engagement transcend charitable acts of kindness and fun. Volunteering must be reframed as an opportunity to develop knowledge, as well as professional, social, and personal skills. The ReV-UP program helps low-income housing residents with an earned economic opportunity to provide a financial backstop and stability. In addition, there are other benefits ranging from life and vocational skills development, to content knowledge about community resources and awareness of the broader community needs, to accruing professional and social networks, building self-esteem and confidence.

Service Coordinators must work from an empowerment model. Service coordinators may use the ReV-UP program as part of their tool box of resources. The goal of the ReV-UP program is to help residents to strive for self-actualization. Residents should do as much as they are capable of doing themselves, have self-determination, and be self-propelling.

During the pilot phase, being on the front-line and in the field, the Service Coordinators have helped to introduce ReV-UP program to the residents and the community, conduct workshops for residents, teach the benefits and values of volunteerism, use rent incentives as a case management tool to assist residents in

making financial plans, champion the program at community roundtables and interface with non-profit host sites to assist residents in finding volunteer opportunities.

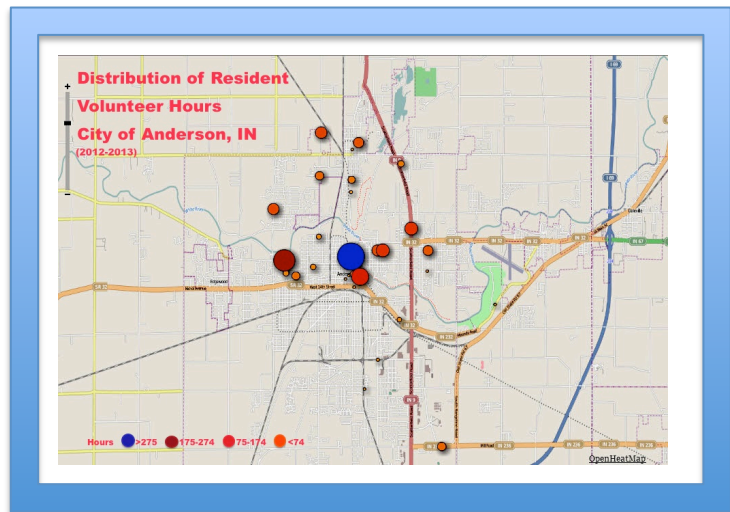
Quotable Feedback from Stakeholder Surveys/Interviews:

1. *"We have to change the culture of the work we do, we must not be seen as foe with lease violations, citations and evictions, but as problem solver with solutions for our residents to help them financially stay in their homes."* (property manager & service coordinator)
2. *"There is a transformative power of work, "doing", regardless if it's employment or volunteerism."* (property developer)
3. *"By showing residents that we care and provide them with financial solutions through the volunteer program, we are building better relationships and a level of trust with our residents."* (property manager)
4. *"We have used this resident volunteer program as a tool to help residents with renewing and weathering rent adjustments or decreased subsidies. They are happy to keep stability and avoid moving."* (property manager)
5. *"The Resident Volunteer program has a triangle effect, we are helping residents but the residents also help others in the community, and a better community benefits us."* (property manager)
6. *"Many individuals and families began connecting with additional non-profit organizations and reporting volunteer hours above and beyond the hours required to earn rental assistance. When our staff members heard stories of how becoming involved with volunteerism changed a resident's life, it changed our lives as well."* (property manager & service coordinator)
7. *"Social investment and economics of the bottom-line have to coexist. We have an obligation to help others to help themselves."* (asset manager)
8. *"We create a lasting legacy when we build lasting quality into low-income housing properties and build strong communities."* (property developer)
9. *"We have to ensure our operations are fundamentally viable and an on-going concern, but it is also in our DNA to achieve a bigger mission of solving community and economic issues."* (project financier)
10. *"Without the resident volunteer to assist with fundraising activities and events, we would be hard-pressed and struggling to stay open and serve our veteran communities."* (non-profit manager)
11. *"The Resident Volunteer Spark Event brought together residents and community leaders to fellowship to help keep our community clean. It was a time of camaraderie and unity."* (non-profit manager)
12. *"Although the residents dearly need the rent incentives, they benefit so much by having a sense of belonging, purpose and actually like to help."* (service coordinator)
13. *"Some residents observe their peers participating and start to change their mindsets about their community. Now when we have events, there is no trash on the ground, people are assisting monitoring stations, breaking down and setting*

- up for events and doing other tasks and duties when asked to!" (service coordinator)*
14. *"Volunteering and earning the rent credits have helped me to save money. It is such a rewarding experience." (resident volunteer)*
  15. *"I am looking forward to buying Christmas presents for my family, including nieces and nephews from the savings I have set aside through the program." (resident volunteer)*
  16. *"The volunteering event brought the community together as one to help each other, and demonstrated that we are concerned about our community." (resident volunteer)*
  17. *"We are able to expand our youth program due to the increase of volunteer help. The Resident Volunteer serves as a positive role model for our youths." (non-profit manager)*

#### Samples of Non-Profits Hosting Resident Volunteers:

- Amvets
- Animal Protection League
- Community Long Term Care
- Dove Harbor
- Faith Church Youth Group
- Food Rescue
- Gleaners Food Bank
- Julien Center – Thrifty Threads
- Keep Indianapolis Beautiful
- Madison County Literacy Coalition
- Paramount Historic Theatre
- Park Place Community Center
- The Help Center
- United Way
- White River Watchers



#### VII. Early Lessons from Resident Volunteering and Earning Efforts

Our incubation pilot ReV-UP program resided in 4 properties in Indiana with approximately 1,000 households. Prior to this program, our baseline was zero. Based on the period between Jan. 1, 2012-June 30, 2013, our ReV-UP program's

early results from the field indicate that the participation rate is about 10% of households, and within this timeframe we experienced an internal growth rate of 50%. We also saw there is a 25% chance of a resident volunteer recurring once the resident participates in the initial volunteering event.

During this period, the resident volunteers earned and generated \$17,000 in additional rent incentives for themselves. Resident volunteers also deployed close to 2,000 hours into the non-profits and charities serving the broader community. These volunteer hours are hours that non-profit community organizations would otherwise not receive service or would have to purchase. There is also a definite multiplier effect factor exceeding 2,000 hours. Currently only one member per household is credited with the volunteer hours. And only the minimum number of hours required for the rent incentives is often reported. It is evident that multiple members may volunteer together on an engagement or the resident volunteers provide more volunteer hours than the minimum.

Without the rent incentive amount “earned” by the residents, the needed financial subsidies would otherwise have to come from other public social assistance or entitlement programs. In addition to measuring outputs, we gauge impact through anecdotes and surveys. The feedback and evaluation from ReV-UP volunteers are that they derive joy from volunteering, establish connections with neighbors and the community, gain valuable skills and fulfill a sense of achievement.

#### Highlights of Initial Results:

# of Residents Volunteering Incidents:	about 10% of households and a 50% period-to-period growth of volunteers
# of Residents Recurring:	25% chance of repeating after participating in Spark Event
# of Volunteer Hours rewarded with Earned Rent Incentives:	Approximately 2,000 hours
\$ Amount of Rent Incentives Earned from Volunteering:	\$17,000

#### Survey Results:

With assistance from the United Way of Central Indiana Volunteer Center, findings from our resident volunteer surveys reveal the following:

1. 96% of survey respondents Agree or Strongly Agree that they feel more connected to the community because of the volunteer work.
2. Consistently >75% Volunteer and Continue to Volunteer because they are helping neighbors and making the community a better place.
3. Net Promoter score is 59. Close to 70% of Volunteers give promoter score of 9 & 10 and are willing to actively and consistently promote the ReV-UP program.
4. Residents are volunteering multiple times per year and some are volunteering beyond the prerequisite minimum hours to receive the rent credits.

#### Insights from Early Results from the Field:

1. Residents volunteer more than the minimum required for rent credits.
2. Resident volunteers at times bring their children, spouse or relatives to a volunteer event thereby increasing the number of people volunteering.
3. The Spark Event also provides an opportunity for time to spend with family, friends and relatives in a service capacity.
4. ResidentCorps groups serve as a common platform to unite adjacent properties and bond as a community.
5. Exposing residents to better lifestyles outside of their property perimeter (i.e., some residents have never heard or been to local restaurants like Panera Bread, 16 blocks north of their residency, never been to the river nor a downtown venue).
6. Residents feel personal growth, have a sense of purpose, and positive self-image.
7. Residents move out and on but still continue to volunteer.

### **VIII. How Do We Know That These Results Characterize a New Definition of Performance Relative to Similar Programs in Our Sector?**

The pivotal change comes from:

- Property investors, naturally averse to expenditures, allocate funds as “investment yielding dividends”. Investing in resident volunteerism has a positive impact on how residents respect and care for the property. Further upstream, the program could be a model for public-policy makers working on social funding and reforming tax code legislation (i.e., earned volunteer credit or modified LIHTC tax credit).
- Service Coordinators move from conduit of services to change agents and catalysts, educating and recruiting resident volunteers. We are building a body of evidence through the service coordinators. We have been invited to present our case study and model to industry practitioners at the

Annual Conference of Association of Service Coordinators.

- Leading non-profits and municipalities recognize low-income residents as productive citizens and part of solution in community development. The United Way of Central Indiana has selected us to participate in its Volunteer Innovation Partnership cohort program. The Points of Light Civic Accelerator has recognized us as one of the “civic venture startups” that inspire, equip and mobilize people to create positive change.

The change redefines the source and reach of volunteer programs, propelling low-income residents to have:

- a. Attitudinal Change. Low-income residents can symbiotically receive and create a public good, uniting communities regardless of economic differences. Residents can leverage the volunteering experience by gaining leadership skills to confidently pursue employment opportunities. Residents also encourage neighbors to be part of the ResidentCorps and advance civic engagement, thus, channeling a collective voice and force.
- b. Behavioral Shift. Residents act more empowered and resilient. The ultimate measure will be low-income residents creating economic self-sufficiency and reducing reliance on public subsidies. Ultimately, residents have housing choice, improve their quality of life and make a lifetime commitment to volunteering and community development.

Our ReV-UP program is innovative in that it provides a financial spark to mobilize first-time volunteers from low-income housing communities. This program hopes to put low income housing residents on a civic pathway to volunteerism to accrue the many benefits associated with volunteerism. Bella Communities designed and tested an innovative supportive service program to tackle simultaneously both financial empowerment and civic engagement mobilization. There are other studies, research and surveys in related fields demonstrating the positive effects of volunteerism and civic engagement. We support and share these thought provoking findings and studies:

### 1. Employment

-Volunteers have a 27 percent higher odds of finding a job after being out of work than non-volunteers [*Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment: Does Volunteering Increase Odds of Finding a Job for the Out of Work? Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and evaluation: Washington, DC, 2013*]

-Volunteers without a high school diploma have a 51 percent higher odds of finding employment [*Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment: Does Volunteering Increase Odds of Finding a Job for the Out of Work? Corporation for National and*

*Community Service, Office of Research and evaluation: Washington, DC, 2013]*

-Working with neighbors, attending public meetings, volunteering, and voter registration were the forms of civic engagement that were most significantly linked to resilience against unemployment. *[2012 Issue Brief, Civic Health and Unemployment II: The Case Builds, The National Conference on Citizenship.]*

## 2. Financial Stability

-Recent reports indicate long-term savings goals like homeownership or retirement could be less significant than the benefits of liquid savings which can be used to smooth consumption in the event of income loss or earnings fluctuations. *[The Assets Agenda 2011, Policy Options to Promote Savings and Asset Development, Reid Cramer, Alejandra Lopez-Fernandini, Lindsay Guge, Justin King, and Jamie Zimmerman]*

--The \$aveNYC program helps New Yorkers with low incomes to build savings. Despite participants' low incomes, their contribution levels and ability to save for a full year indicate a willingness to save when presented with the right opportunity. *[SaveNYC Account-Innovation In Asset Building, Research Update, December 2010, NYC Department of Consumer Affairs, Office of Financial Empowerment.]*

## 3. Anti-Poverty

-Higher concentrations of people living in poverty might discourage volunteering by creating the type of stressors that place greater demands on individuals and families. *[Volunteering in America 2010: National, State, and City Information, Washington, DC. 2010, June.]*

-Short term incentives can affect long term behaviors. Incentives are not just about costs and benefits – they are about what we pay attention to when our minds are strained under many demands. *[Small Changes, Real Impact: Applying behavioral economics in asset building programs, the Behavioral Economics Technical Assistance (BETA) Project, CFED, December 2013.]*

## 4. Education

Young people from low-income backgrounds take advantage of service-related programs offering a reduction in the cost of higher education. Barriers to participating in education and service often include disruptions in home life, the need to care for parents, siblings, or their own children, and homelessness (consistently or episodically). These challenges prevent young people from withstanding an inability to generate income, adhering to full-time education rigors, or meeting long-term voluntary service requirement *[Civic Pathways Out of Poverty and Into Opportunity, Presented by PACE Philanthropy for Active Civic*



*Engagement, November 2010.]*

## 5. Health

-There is a significant relationship between volunteering and good health; when individuals volunteer, they not only help their community but also experience better health in later years, whether in terms of greater longevity, higher functional ability, or lower rates of depression. *[Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development. The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research, Washington, DC 2007.]*

## 6. Community Involvement

-- Each community boasts a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future. A thorough map of those assets would begin with an inventory of the gifts, skills and capacities of the community's residents. *[Reprinted with permission of John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, pp. 1-11, from Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets, Evanston, IL: Institute for Policy Research (1993).]*

When asked who should be responsible for improving community, "Individuals" often is number one outpacing local, state and federal government, businesses, neighborhood and faith based associations and non-profit organizations. *[Tracking Investment and Engagement: A Regional Portrait July, 2011, The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta.]*

-Those who volunteer are more likely to engage in their community. *[Tracking Investment and Engagement: A Regional Portrait July, 2011, The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta.]*

-Involvement in one's community promotes skill development and personal growth. Participants in national service programs have shown a greater acceptance of personal responsibility in employment advancement, likelihood of engaging in public service, commitment to, attachment to, and awareness about the community served. *[Frumkin, P., Jastrzab, J., Vaaler, M., Greeney, A., Grimm Jr., R. T., Cramer, K., and Dietz, N. (2009). Inside National Service: AmeriCorps' Impact on Participants. ]*

-When youth from disadvantaged circumstances engage in volunteering, school-based service, and service-learning, they are more likely to continue on the path of service for a lifetime. By combating these issues, conditions for vibrant communities, upward mobility, social capital and community development are seeded. *[Volunteering in America - An Overview of Corporation Research (Issue Brief), July 2007]*

-To volunteer successfully there must be an infrastructure that can recruit, place, and manage prospective volunteers. There must be nonprofits with missions that engage volunteers, as well as provide the kinds of activities that interest volunteers. *Volunteering in America 2010: National, State, and City Information*, Washington, DC. 2010, June.]

## **IX. Conclusion**

Low-income housing families have an acute need to gain an economic opportunity to build financial stability. Bella Communities' innovative resident volunteer engagement program, coupling the opportunity to earn rent credits through volunteering and promoting civic engagement, is rooted in the idea that the opportunity to earn an economic incentive through volunteering can fundamentally impact people's financial stability in two ways: first, by providing residents a solution to stitch a financial backstop to withstand emergencies and shortfalls, and, second, by fostering a sense of financial relief so that residents can pursue other endeavors to improve personal wellbeing and the community through volunteering.

In the near term, we intend this whitepaper to inform and encourage other property investors and owners of low-income housing communities to adopt this innovative program. Through our lessons learned and development, we can use our training and implementation methodology to help other communities implement a similar program and mitigate implementation risks, compress time to roll out and remove complexities and cost inefficiencies.

Ultimately, we are working towards building a body of evidence from all the collected data to advocate for a broader public policy conversation about low-income housing funding, financing and servicing. The ultimate outcome is to provide programs for low-income housing residents to help themselves build financial stability and participate in civic engagement. ■